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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001604

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TAGS: PGOV PREL I2

SUBJECT: FORMER IRAQI CHARGE REND RAHIM VOICES CONCERNS  
ABOUT UPCOMING PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a May 21 meeting with the Ambassador, former Iraqi Charge d'Affaires to the U.S. Rend Rahim shared her concerns regarding the provincial elections planned for later this year. In particular, Rahim underlined fears that independent candidates and those not currently aligned with existing power centers could be subject to intimidation during the campaign season. She predicted that established parties would use both financial resources and arms to maintain the status quo. The Ambassador acknowledged such concerns were well grounded but also noted the Iraqi government's desire to have the elections be seen as credible and legitimate could serve as a counterweight to lessen such tendencies. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador's May 21 meeting with former Iraqi Charge Rend Rahim centered on preparations for, and progress towards, upcoming provincial elections planned for later this year. The Ambassador noted that the Independent Higher Electoral Commission (IHEC) is taking its responsibility seriously and work is still on target for elections in 2008. Getting the election law right is critical and, to that end, acceptance of the open list approach would constitute an important step in the right direction -- something both UNAMI and the U.S. have promoted. Final approval for this would, however, require agreement from current CoR members who owe their present position to the closed list mechanism of previous elections -- not necessarily an easy task. The U.S. message, however, is clear: all must do what is best for Iraqi democracy over the long run, rather than protect short term political advantage. To his credit, the Ambassador noted, PM Maliki has been consistent in supporting this effort.

¶3. (C) Rahim made clear her strong support for the open list approach as well but expressed concern that unless a concerted effort is made, the campaign playing field would be tilted heavily against independent candidates not associated with existing organizations. In particular, she predicted that given ongoing intra-Shia tensions and the vested interests of those currently in the government, violence and intimidation could well exceed levels seen in 2005. She sought the Ambassador's ideas for how best to better level the playing field and lower the fear of those seeking to campaign and participate.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador agreed that Rahim's concerns were well-founded but also stressed the Iraqi government's strong interest in having the election be seen as credible. To that end, the U.S., UNAMI and the international community in general need to make clear that the world is watching. Rahim agreed that this was essential but asked if something more concrete -- an office, perhaps under UNAMI, to investigate and take action against campaign irregularities -- could be set up to give people confidence that complaints would be dealt with seriously. The Ambassador expressed strong reservations about UNAMI taking on such a role. While the

international community would certainly play an observational role, an office such as that outlined by Rahim would need to be Iraqi in nature and most likely made up of representatives of each of the relevant parties. Rahim agreed that such an arrangement could work to protect the interests of current political parties but would not address the concerns of those outside these bodies: "People feel very disempowered. When elections come, people outside the power structure may be afraid to run or support independents who do run, and this could lower turnout."

¶15. (C) In response to Rahim's question on Embassy support for wide participation in the elections, the Ambassador outlined the ongoing work of IRI and NDI, including the "road show" currently underway to help educate communities in the provinces, as well as our own PRT personnel, on party formation, organization and other campaign mechanics. He noted that this will be an iterative process with progress accruing over several election cycles. Rahim expressed hope that this would be the case but worried that such an iterative process could end up entrenching established power rather than dissolving it.

¶16. (C) Before concluding the meeting, the Ambassador and Rahim discussed the posture the Sadrist would take in the elections. Rahim noted the credibility Sadrist have among the Shia poor and expressed the hope that they can find a way to disassociate themselves from the JAM. The Ambassador agreed that some Sadrist recognize that the JAM is not winning them hearts and minds. To this end, the U.S. would encourage efforts to engender a dynamic akin to what happened with the Sunnis last year and, to that end, is willing to talk to any Sadrist who is willing to talk to us.

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